

# What Should You Know About Health Information Exchange?

## Outreach Materials

### Provided By:

The National Learning Consortium (NLC)

### Developed By:

The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology  
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## NATIONAL LEARNING CONSORTIUM

The National Learning Consortium (NLC) is a virtual and evolving body of knowledge and resources designed to support healthcare providers and health IT professionals working towards the implementation, adoption and meaningful use of certified EHR systems.

The NLC represents the collective EHR implementation experiences and knowledge gained directly from the field of ONC's outreach programs ([REC](#), [Beacon](#), [State HIE](#)) and through the [Health Information Technology Research Center \(HITRC\)](#) Communities of Practice (CoPs).

The following resource can be used in support of the [EHR Implementation Lifecycle](#). It is recommended by "boots-on-the-ground" professionals for use by others who have made the commitment to implement or upgrade to certified EHR systems.

### EHR Implementation Lifecycle



## DESCRIPTION & INSTRUCTIONS

The 'Exchange 101: Introduction to Direct Adoption and Implementation' outreach materials are intended to aid providers and health IT implementers with EHR Implementation Step 5: Achieve Meaningful Use. The collection of outreach materials can be used to educate different audiences about health information exchange using the Direct solution in support of implementing care coordination meaningful use objectives.

This specific resource includes generic information on how Direct exchange enables provider-to-provider and patient-to-provider communication and how you can participate in health information exchange.

Distribute these materials to the appropriate audiences to educate them about using Direct for health information exchange.

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# What Should You Know About Health Information Exchange?

The adoption and use of health information technology (HIT) by doctors, pharmacists, clinical lab, and other health care professionals leads to better coordination of patient care, reductions in health care spending, and greater ability for patients to access their personal health information. The Federal Government has played a key role in this process: providing financial incentives for physicians to purchase and use electronic health record (EHR) systems, funding for states to jumpstart health information exchange (HIE) efforts, and supporting innovative organizations that are charting the path for widespread change.

## The value of health information exchange

The exchange of health information—like a summary of a recent doctor's visit, lab test result, or medication history—enables more accurate and timely communication between the health care professionals responsible for patient wellness. For instance, a hospital nurse could provide a care summary upon discharge to a patient's primary care physician to effectively transition the patient's care and to ensure the continuation of complementary care. Additionally, sharing test results and care summaries with diagnosis and treatment history reduces duplicative or unnecessary testing. Lastly, with better care and fewer unnecessary tests, health information exchange stands to reduce overall health care costs.

## The Direct standard

Direct is a technical standard for exchanging health information between health care entities (e.g. primary care physicians, specialists, hospitals, clinical labs) in a trusted network. It is secure, easy to use, inexpensive, and approved for use by nationally-recognized experts and organizations. Direct functions like regular email with additional security measures to ensure that messages are only accessible to the intended recipient, per the protection regulations of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

## KEY TERMS

**Electronic Health Record (EHR):** Many physicians use an electronic health record (EHR) system to document information about their patients and manage certain office processes, from intake to diagnosis, treatment, and discharge. EHRs can be used to generate reminders about scheduling appointments, following up with prescription refills, or checking for test results.

**Health Information Exchange (HIE):** Health care professionals—such as your physician, local pharmacist, or lab technician—often need to exchange information relevant to your care, via a timely, secure and reliable network. Electronic health information exchange (HIE) is faster, more accurate and more complete than communication by telephone, fax or paper. Using simple, inexpensive methods for HIE, health care professionals can send and receive patient information like test results, care summaries, and medication histories to other known and trusted providers in their network.

**Personal Health Record (PHR):** To be better informed and more engaged in important decisions about their health, patients need access to their clinical information. An online electronic health record that is maintained by and fully available to a patient, commonly called a personal health record (PHR), can help meet this need. Patients can save their lab results, care summaries, and medication histories in a PHR, then use health information exchange to forward this information to their health care professional to help them make more informed decisions.

## How does Direct exchange enable provider-to-provider and patient-to-provider communication?

Direct exchange establishes a secure communication channel between health care professionals, but can also be used for communications between clinicians and patients. Using Direct exchange, health care professionals can exchange information about a treatment plan, diagnosis, or laboratory test result with other clinicians or with their patients. In turn, patients can use Direct exchange to schedule appointments or to send information about health indicators monitored at home, such as blood pressure or weight. Increasingly, patients have begun to use Personal Health Records to track the history of their diagnoses, treatments, medications or test results. This information can be entered into a patient's PHR manually—by the patient or other designated proxy, but it is also possible to have the information populated automatically by the health care provider's electronic health record system using Direct exchange.

### THE EHR MEANINGFUL USE INCENTIVE PAYMENT PROGRAM

This federal program, created by the HITECH Act and maintained by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, provides financial incentives to physicians and hospitals that adopt health information technology, including electronic health records and health information exchange.

### Facilitating referrals and coordination of care

Compared to phone calls and faxes, Direct exchange enables more seamless referrals between providers and better experiences for patients during transitions of care. Health care providers can exchange referral and payer forms, along with care summaries, medication lists, and lab results with the referring or consulting provider in advance of their encounter with the patient. These documents can be exchanged immediately in the form of electronic attachments to a Direct message, eliminating the need for courier or patient transport of records, thereby reducing the risk of lost documents and incomplete or inaccurate information. With the test results and diagnosis in hand, health professionals are better equipped to diagnose and treat the patient.

## How can I participate in health information exchange?

The [Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(CMS\)](#) aims to increase the use of Health IT through the [Meaningful Use Incentive Payment Program](#). Since this program's inception, more than half of physicians have begun using electronic health records systems and about three-quarters of their EHR systems meet the requirements set forth by the program.<sup>1</sup> Patients and their families can also help to encouraging the adoption of both EHRs and HIE by:

- Asking their health care providers about HIE about their use of EHRs and HIE
- Requesting that their providers provide them with electronic access to their information

*For more information about Health Information Technology, visit [www.HealthIT.gov](http://www.HealthIT.gov)*